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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOLUME XXXVI

DECEMBER, 1921

NUMBER 8

METRICAL FORM OF THE EPIC, AS DISCUSSED BY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICS

An attempt will be made in this article not only to give the discussion of the sixteenth-century critics regarding the proper verse-form for the heroic poem, but also to show how they defined the poet. Parrhasius (1531) believes that one should not doubt that there were poets in Greece before Homer, but that it seems reasonably certain that he was the first who sang the praises of the deeds of heroes in that verse which is called heroic, a measure most adapted to the easy and simple flow of words.¹ Daniello remarks in 1536 that, owing to the fact that no heroic poem exists in Italian, it is a difficult matter to decide the question of the most suitable verse-form for the vulgar tongue. It appears to him a strange state of affairs that with such talented writers in all Italy none had endeavored to write "heroicamente," but all had contented themselves with composing sonnets and stories.² Those who wrote in Latin, he continues, had Vergil for a model, but the Italian writers had no one to imitate. Some have had the temerity to call unrhymed eleven-syllable verse the heroic of the Italian, but Daniello recommends as the best meter for the epic the eleven-syllable verse enclosed in every third line,³ because both Dante and Petrarch had advised such a meter. Daniello contends that it is not the verse which renders the subject-matter grave or sublime, but the choice of words, sentences, and figures of speech. He does not believe

¹ Parrhasius, J., *In Q. Horatii Flacci Artem Poeticam Commentaria*, Napoli, 1531, p. 35.

² Daniello, B., *Della poetica*, Vinegia, 1536, p. 130.

³ "A me parrebbe che col versi di undecisillabe interzato scrivere ne la deveste," *ibid.*, p. 131.

that only that which is without rhyme can be called heroic verse, but also that which is in rhyme.⁴ It should be remarked that Trissino's *Italia liberata* (1547), the first heroic poem written in Italian according to classical ideas, was composed in unrhymed eleven-syllable verse. It may be that his attention was first called to this meter by Daniello's observations.

Robortelli struggled with a passage which puzzled the sixteenth-century commentators, and which has given Greek scholars trouble even up to the present day. The explanation of the matter is that the text consulted by Robortelli and the other sixteenth-century commentators contained the Greek word *ἐποποιία*, which caused considerable confusion in their interpretation. Bywater brackets the word and translates as follows, omitting any reference to the heroic poem: ⁵ "There is further an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose or in verse, and if in verse either in some one or in a plurality of meters." Robortelli, as Paccius before him, has: "Nudis autem sermonibus sive metris solummodo epopoeia utitur, metrorum quidem hactenus sive mixtus aliquibus inter se, sive generis eiusdem alicuius." This manifest opposition to Aristotle's assertion in another part of the *Poetics* caused Robortelli a great deal of difficulty. He turns and recasts the passage, but finally gives up being able to secure a satisfactory translation. He concludes that Aristotle is here neither censuring nor praising the employment of mixed meter, which Horace had condemned when he stated that the epic should be written in heroic verse, which Homer had used.⁶ He further states that an epic poet to the vulgar mind is one who writes in hexameter verse.⁷ There seems to be a double reason for the employment of heroic verse in that it is suitable for elevated subjects and for varied language.⁸ The epic poets do not use iambic or tetrameter verse because a mixture of verses (and here he quotes Aristotle with assurance) would be absurd, and he concludes with Aristotle that the epic should be written in heroic verse.⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵ Bywater, I., *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Oxford, 1909, p. 4.

⁶ *In librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetica Explicationes*, Florentiae, p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸ "Nullum genus metri magis recipit varietatem linguarum & translationes quam Heroum," p. 278.

⁹ "Cur Epici poetæ iambico, neque tetrametro utantur versu." *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Segni, meeting the same difficulty encountered by Robortelli in the first chapter of the *Poetics*, translates: "Ma l'Epoepia fa l'imitatione solamente con la prosa, ò col verso; et col verso, ò mescolato di piu sorti: ò con quello, che sia d'una sola spetie,"¹⁰ and Segni attempts to justify the assertion that the epic can be in prose because there would have been nothing in common between the "Dialogues" of Socrates and the "Mimes" of Sophron, of which Aristotle speaks, except that they were both in prose. He does not feel sure of his ground, however, for he acknowledges that this assertion of Aristotle appears very strange to him.¹¹ Segni asserts (and this statement is frequently repeated by later critics) that the stories of Boccaccio can be called poems, if judged according to the subject-matter and the personages, for they are similar to the "Margites" of Homer.

Madius points out that "epopoeia" is a Greek word having no Latin equivalent, and that Cicero had called such poets as Vergil and Homer epic poets. The word *ἔπος* really signifies a heroic poem according to Madius, and the two expressions came to be used interchangeably. He repeats that the hexameter verse is proper to the epic, and that it should not be written in mixed meter, and he points out in his *Interpretatio* of Horace that Horace also judged the hexameter the proper meter.¹²

Muzio (1551), in the beginning of his second book, contends that blank verse can take the place of the hexameter.¹³

Varchi states that poets may be divided into first, those who observe both imitation and verse (to this division would belong all the works of Homer); the second class would be that in which imitation without verse is sufficient. In this way Lucan and Cicero and above all Boccaccio in the *Decameron* would be considered poets. Dante, continues Varchi, was the first to write in heroic verse in Italian, and Petrarch tried the heroic Latin verse in his

¹⁰ Segni, B., *Rettorica et Poetica d'Aristotile*, Firenze, 1549, p. 276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹² Madius, V., *In Q. Horatii Flacci De Arte Poetica Interpretatio*, Venetiis, 1550, p. 338.

¹³

Contra lo stil continuo, in quella vece,
Che già gli Antichi usar le sei misure.
Porrem le rime senza rima, queste
Sono altra l'altre, chiare, pure, e alte.

Africa.¹⁴ Varchi was apparently criticized for this statement, for, contrary to the outlined plan, he devotes his next "lezione" in the Florentine Academy to a discussion of heroic verse. Some have said, he begins, that there are no Italian heroic poets because the Italian tongue lacks hexameter verse, without which a heroic poem cannot be composed. Others have said that neither Dante, Petrarch, nor Boccaccio should be considered heroic poets. He discusses whether Tuscan has hexameter verse and what constitutes the heroic verse in the Tuscan tongue. Whoever is familiar with the Latin hexameter will recognize at once that no such verse of six feet exists in Italian. Every one admits that the most serious verse that can be found should be employed in the heroic poem. There are some who contend that the *terza rima* is the heroic verse of the Italians; others hold that the *ottava rima*, which Boccaccio used in the *Teseide*, corresponds to the Latin; still others believe that blank verse (*versi sciolti* or *senza rima*) represents the hexameter.¹⁵ Varchi does not attempt to settle the question, although one might deduce that he is inclined to agree with Muzio that blank verse should be employed, and he does not even claim to be able to decide whether Trissino or Alamanni invented "versi sciolti."¹⁶

Giraldi Cinthio correctly defines "poet" as a maker ("facitore"). Not on account of the verses, he continues, but principally on account of the subject-matter is one called poet.¹⁷ Giraldi believes that eleven-syllable verse should be employed to treat heroic subjects, because the seven syllable-verse is not suitable to serious subjects, and the twelve-syllable verse with its "sdrucci-

¹⁴ Varchi, B., *Lezioni della poetica*, Firenze, 1553, p. 625.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 643.

¹⁶ On this point it is interesting to compare a letter written by Claudio Tolomei to Marcantonio Cinuzzi under date of Rome, July 1, 1543 (*De le lettere di M. Claudio Tolomei*, Vinegia, MDXLVII, I, 8.): "Io non so quanto mi piaccia la forma di questi versi sciolti, gli quali da molti s'usano per rappresentarci il verso Heroico Greco e Latino, si come furon gia usati da M. Luigi Alamanni nel trasferir l'Epitalamio di Peleo e di Tetide, che fece Catullo, e da Ludovico Martelli nel tradurre il quarto libro de l'Eneide di Vergilio; . . . e hora intendo che M. Giovangiorgio Trissino con questa stessa via, scrive Heroicamente in molti libri le guerre che gia fece Belisario in Italia."

¹⁷ Giraldi Cinthio, G. B., *Discorsi*, Vinegia, 1554, p. 56.

oloso finimento" lacks gravity and tends to debase the composition.¹⁸ He does not think that the poems "senza rima" are in any way adapted to heroic matter. It seems to him that the best manner of verse used in Italian is alone suitable to compositions of such importance. In order that the art, the study, the thought of the poet may be evident, he should express himself with sweetness and gravity. This is impossible, he contends, with the "versi sciolti," "of which the inventor was Trissino," because they are free from the obligation of rhyme. Take away rhyme from verse, he concludes, and there remains a composition without grace, without sweetness, and without heroic dignity.¹⁹ Trissino should be blamed for introducing blank verse, for inasmuch as it is in reality nothing more than the language of every day, it is not suitable to grand subjects. Care should be taken to make the rhyme and words serve the concept, and not the concept the rhyme. It is necessary that the rhyme accord in sound, in signification, and in suavity of harmony,²⁰ and the poet should take care not to use words which would retard the flow of the verse or make it more sluggish, for if vivacity were taken from the heroic verse it would lose its worth.

Luisinus, repeating that the epic uses the hexameter, makes the assertion that one is a poet not on account of the meter, but on account of the plot and fiction. Pigna, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, believes that the hexameter is the proper verse, not only in Greek and Latin, but in Italian, and laments the fact that the hexameter had not been introduced into Italian.²¹

Scaliger, opposed to the view already expressed by Luisinus and recurring frequently among later critics, does not believe that the word "poet" is derived from the fact that the poet employs the fictitious, but from the fact that he makes verse.²²

Trissino contends that not on account of verses and their quality, but on account of imitation, ought one to be named poet. If one wrote of medicine or of philosophy in verse he would not be called poet, but philosopher and doctor, just as the *Decameron* of Boccaccio and other works like it, although in prose, without any doubt

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁰ "Nel suono, nel sentimento, nella soavità della armonia."

²¹ Pigna, G. B., *I Romanzi*, Vinegia, 1554, p. 63.

²² "Poetae igitur nomen non a fingendo, ut putarunt, quia fictis uteretur: sed initio a faciendo versu ductum est" (*Poetices*, lib. i, cap. ii).

can be named poems.²³ The hexameter is very well suited to Greek and Latin on account of its regularity, its lofty tone and its adaptability to idioms and rhetorical figures, as seen in Homer first and then in Vergil; nevertheless Trissino prefers the hendecasyllable in blank verse.²⁴ He believes that Dante invented the *terza rima* in order to approximate the Latin heroic meter, just as Boccaccio invented the *ottava rima* in his *Teseide* for the same reason, for up to his time no one had written of deeds of arms. This *ottava rima* was adopted by almost all those who have since written of arms, that is, Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and others. "I, however, wishing to write in this tongue our *Italia liberata da Gotti* (sic)," continues Trissino, "which is a matter of arms, have wished to leave the *terza rima* which Dante invented, and likewise the *ottava rima* invented by Boccaccio, because they did not seem adapted to continued matter on account of the frequent according of the endings, from which arises a certain uniformity of figures, because in these it is necessary always to have relations of two verses to two verses, or of three to three, or of four to four, and so on; a thing which is totally contrary to the continuation of the matter, therefore I dismiss the accord of the endings and retain the verse, that is, the hendecasyllable (the hendecasyllable being superior, as Dante says, to all the other verses of this tongue) called 'versi sciolti' on account of being free from the necessity of making the endings agree. This, then, will be the verse which, according to my idea, is suitable to the heroic poem."

Minturno in his *Arte poetica* calls Dante a heroic poet because he used the *terza rima*, which can be called heroic verse as can the *ottava rima* used by Petrarch, or the "versi sciolti," "which this age has commenced to use." There is also mixed poetry, that is, partly in prose and partly in verse, as Sannazaro's *Arcadia* or the *Ameto* of Boccaccio. He considers that Horace, who wrote his *Ars Poetica* in verse, is no more a poet than Aristotle, who wrote in prose. He points out that the name "epic poet" is derived from the Greek "epos" which really means 'word,' but has come to signify hexameter verse. From this circumstance arises the fact that those who wrote in verse of medicine, music, or philosophy were called epic writers by the common people among the ancients,

²³ *Tutte le opere*, Verona, 1729, p. 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

when they ought to have been called doctors, musicians, or philosophers. But the nomenclature adopted by the common people conquered; each type of author was called an epic writer. In spite of this usage, Minturno believes that epic poetry can be only in verse.

Castelvetro, like all the commentators of Aristotle, had difficulty in explaining the passage in the first chapter of the *Poetics*, which seemed to be capable of the single inference that the epic could be in prose as well as in verse. That the older epic used every manner of verse is evident from the fact that Aristotle blamed Chaeremon for employing a variety of meter, because the hexameter, the most magnificent and enduring, was recognized by Aristotle as the only suitable meter for the heroic poem. Therefore, concludes Castelvetro, if Aristotle allowed prose at all, it was only to admit its use as possible, but he shows clearly that it had not been commonly employed as a means of expression. Castelvetro concludes²⁵ that the epic cannot be in prose, but must be in verse, although he, too, admits Lucan and Boccaccio into the ranks of poets.

It is curious to see that in France the same discussion was taking place. There was the same endeavor to approximate in French verse the hexameter of the Latin, and the resultant discussion as to which meter was nearest the equivalent of the heroic. There were echoes of the discussion of blank verse.

Fabri, in his *Art poétique* of 1521, refers to the Alexandrine, which had been so much employed in the *chansons de geste*, as an "antique maniere de rithmer," and such it remained until considerably later in the century.

Sebilet (1548) scarcely knows what an epic poem is. In speaking of the different forms of verse he says under the caption "de dis syllabes": "Et a vray dire cés deux dernières especes (*i. e.*, the eight- and ten-syllable line) sont les premières, principales, et plus usitées; pource que l'une sert au François de ce que sert au Latin les vers Elegiaque: et l'autre s'accommode par luy a ce que le Latin escrit en Carme Heroïque."²⁶ It is evident from this that the decasyllable is still the heroic verse. It is only later that the Alexandrine supplants it when Pelletier and Ronsard gave it the impetus which put it once more in vogue.

²⁵ Castelvetro, L., *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata et sposta*, Vienna, 1570, p. 20.

²⁶ *Art Poétique François*, ed. crit. pub. par Félix GaiFFE, Paris, 1910, I, v.

According to Pelletier (1555), the Alexandrine is the proper meter for the epic.²⁷ Pelletier contends that the epic is the only genre which gives the true title of poet.²⁸

In the chapter of his *Deffence* devoted to the "long poëme francoys,"²⁹ Du Bellay makes no mention of the question of verse-form, but in the second book³⁰ we find the following: "Autrement qui ne voudroit reigler sa rythme comme j'ai dit il vaudroit beaucoup mieux ne rymer point, mais faire des vers libres, comme a fait Petrarque en quelque endroit, et de notre tens le seigneur Loys Aleman, en sa non moins docte que plaisante Agriculture. . . . Aussi faudroit-il bien que ces vers non rymez feussent bien charnuz et nerveuz, afin de compenser par ce moyen le default de la rythme." It is interesting to note here the reference to Petrarch and to Alamanni, both of whom had been so frequently mentioned during the course of the discussion in Italy.

Du Bellay uses the expression "vers heroiques" when referring³¹ to the *coq-à-l'âne*. Commenting on this passage, M. Chamard says: "C'est le nom que portait alors le vers décasyllabe (chez les anciens, il désignait l'hexamètre dactylique). On remarquera que pas une fois, dans *la Deffence*, il n'est question de l'Alexandrin. Lorsque Ronsard en 1555, dans le premier livre des *Hymnes*, restaura le grand vers, il lui transporta délibérément la qualification réservée jusqu'alors au décasyllabe, et pour marquer son intention bien nettement, il fit suivre des pièces écrites en Alexandrins de cette indication: *vers héroïques*, tandis qu'il mettait cette autre: *vers communs* aux pièces écrites en décasyllabes."

In his *Art poétique* (1565) Ronsard says that the Alexandrine is the truly heroic French verse. "Les Alexandrins tiennent la place en notre langue, telle que les vers héroïques entre les Grecs et les Latins." In the first preface to the *Franciade* (1572) we find, however: "Si tu me dis, Lecteur, que je devois composer mon ouvrage en vers Alexandrins, pource qu'ils sont pour le jourd'huy

²⁷ *Art Poétique*, II, 3.

²⁸ "L'œuvre heroïque ét celui qui donne le pris et le vrei titre de poëte" (II, VIII, 73).

²⁹ *La Deffence et Illustration de la langue francoyse*, édition par Henri Chamard, Paris, 1904.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, II, ix, pp. 263 ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

plus favorablement receuz de nos Seigneurs et Dames de la Court . . . lesquels vers j'ay remis le premier en honneur, je te responds qu'il m'eust esté cent fois plus aisé d'escrire mon œuvre en vers Alexandrins qu'aux autres, d'autant qu'ils sont plus longs, et par consequent moins sujets, sans la honteuse conscience que j'ay qu'ils sentent trop leur prose."³² After he had commenced the *Franciade*, which is in decasyllables, Ronsard says: "Si je n'ai commencé la *Franciade* en vers Alexandrins, lesquels j'ai mis, comme tu sais, en vogue et en honneur, il s'en faut prendre à ceux qui ont puisance de me commander (here, of course, referring to Charles IX) et non à ma volonté." About the same time, in the second preface to the *Franciade* (1573-4), we find "Il ne faut t'esmerveiller, Lecteur, dequoy je n'ay composé ma *Franciade* en vers Alexandrins, qu'autrefois en ma jeunesse, par ignorance, je pensois tenir en nostre langue le rang des carmes Heroïques, encores qu'ils respondent plus aux senaires des Tragiques qu'aux magnanimes vers d'Homere et de Virgile, les estimant pour lors plus convenables aux magnifiques arguments et aux plus excellents conceptions de l'esprit, que les autres vers communs."³³ Ronsard, although not employing the Alexandrine in his epic poem, shows clearly that he is proud of the honor of having restored it, and is without doubt a warm partisan of its use.³⁴

Vauquelin de la Fresnaye, adding nothing new to the discussion, has the following:

Pour un si grand ouvrage en françois accomplir!
 En vers de dix ou douze après il le faut mettre:
 Ces vers la nous prenons pour le grave Hexametre.
 Nos longs vers on appelle Alexandrins, d'autant
 Que le Roman qui va les prouesses contant
 D'Alexandre le grand, l'un des neuf preux de l'aage,
 En ces vers fut escrit d'un Romanzé langage
 Héroïques ainsi les Carmes furent dits
 D'autant que les Heros les hauts gestes iadis
 En ces vers on chanta.³⁵

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³² Ronsard, P. de, *Œuvres*, éd. Marty-Laveaux, Paris, Lemerre (1887-1893), III, 516.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

³⁴ E. Faguet, *Seizième Siècle*, Paris, 1894.

³⁵ *L'Art Poétique de Vauquelin de la Fresnaye*, éd. par Georges Pellissier, Paris, 1885, II. 506 ff.